ANCIENT MITHILĀ : THE CENTRE OF UNIQUE EDUCATION AND EXAMINATION SYSTEM

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Ancient Mithilā was the land of scholars, literateurs and prominent site for Brāhmaṇic studies.[1] Mithilā which is popularly known as the Videha, Tīrabhūkti (Tirhut) is that part of the country, which falls in between 25°.28′ and 26°.52′ North latitude and 84°.46′ East longitude.[2] Mithilā is bounded on the north by the Himalayas and on the east, south and west by the river Kosi (Kausiki), the Ganga and Gandaka respectively. It comprised the present commissionaries of Tirhut, Darbhanga, Kosi and the Nepal terai, Janakpur and Narayani Anchal and the lower ranges of the Himalayas, It has well marked natural regions with its size varying in different ages. From the foot hills of the Himalayas in the north to the Ganges in the south it is 160 Kilometer broad and from the Mahananda in the east to the Gandaki in the west it is 400 K.m. long. Its area is 64,000 square Kilometers.[3] Its history does not centre round feats of arms but round courts which gave patronage to higher pursuits of learnings. It was in the halls of the city of Mithilā that the great and unparallel philosophical discussions, ever attempted in the history of human thought, were held. It reminds us of their glorious past in the political and cultural life of ancient India.[4] Mithilā is the celebrated land of Sitā, daughter of Siradhvaja Janaka and wife of Rāma of Ayodhyā who is regarded as an incarnation of lord Viṣṇu.

Of all the ancient states which existed in the region of modern Bihar, the land of Mithilā was the first to come into the contact with Āryan civilization. We find a reference to the videhan country in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Videha seems to be known to the *Saṁhitā of*

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1. Jayadeva Mishra, *Rise and Fall of Universities in Ancient Bihar*, P. U., 1980.
2. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. VIII, 1907, p. 187.
3. Upendra Thakur, *History of Mithila*, Mithila Research Institute, Darbhanga, 1956, pp. 2-5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 1880.

Yajurveda. The *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* mentions the cows of videha which appears to have been especially famous in India in the Vedic times. In *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* the story of Videgha Māthava and the introduction of fire cult are given.[5] The other rulers of this territory, viz., Nami Sāpya, Para Ahlāra, Vaideha and Janaka vaideha are referred to in the Vedic literature. The Epic and Purāṇic lIterature show Mithilā as a seat of royality in the very beginning of its traditional history and Nimi Videha, Son of Ikṣvāku and grandson of Manu Vaivasvata, founded the kingdom. If this literature has any value, it necessarily points to the fact that Videha was colonised by the Āryans in very beginning and came to have a regular dynasty. Nimi, the son of Manu came to this land of sacrifices and his son Mithi founded a kingdom which was named Mithilā after him. He was also named Mithi because of his birth from attrition. He was also called 'Janaka' on account of his extraordinary birth and Videha as his father was bodiless. The country hence forward came to known as Mithilā.[6] The name of Videha we first of all come across in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Yajurveda*.[7] The name Tirabhukti also occurs on the seals discovered in Vaiśālī belonging to the Gupta period (4th century A.D.).[8] This clearly refers to a land situated on the bank of the river and is a direct proof of the fact that Vaiśālī was known to have been in Tirhut.

Mithilā was ruled over by a gallaxy of philosopher kings. The story of the colonisation of this part of Āryāvarta by the Āryan settlers is indeed fascinating, a story which is vividly told in the Vedas and which has hardly and parallel in the history of mankind. The adventurous clan of the Videhas, led by Agni Vaiśvānar and their priests of the Gautama's race dashed from across the Sadānirā swooped down upon the marshy and uncultivated land, caused Agni, the Fire-God, to taste it through sacrifices and ultimately established themself into the region which later came to be renowned as the famous land of the Videhas under the Janaka dynasty, a supreme seat of learning and philosophy.

The eight clans including the great Videhas and Licchavis inhabiting this land, formed the confederation of the Vṛjis and established

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5. *Śatapatha Brāhmana*, I.4.1. 10-19.
6. Upendra Thakur, *History of Mithila*, p. 6.
7. Yogendra Mishra, *History of Videha*, Janaki Prakashana, Patna, 1981, p. 18.
8. Vaisali Seal, *Basharh Excavation*, 1903-4 "Tirabhuktav Vaiśāli Tara"; S. N. Singh, *History of Tirhut*, 1922.

the famous republic of the Vṛjis or the Licchavis, oldest republic in the history with the fall of the mighty Licchavis, Ajātśatru occupied Vaiśāli and became the master of Mithilā. Thus Mithilā formed a part of the Magadhan empire, but it still retained its distinctive features. The Mauryas and the Guptas honoured its age-old democratic traditions. The exit of the Guptas was promptly followed by the coming in of other powers. Mithilā after Harṣa's death came to be ruled over and ravaged by the Tibetans, the later Guptas, the Maukharis, the Pālas, the Gurjara Pratihāras, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas and the Candelas in succession, till the advent of the Karnāṭa King Nānyadeva, the founder of celebrated Karnāṭa dynasty (1099 A. D.). Under Nānya and his descendants Mithilā prospered exceedingly and became again a unique centre of education. After a rule of two centuries and a quarter over Mithilā and direct rule of about a century over the Nepal valley, the celebrated Karnāṭa dynasty made its tragic exit from the political scene of Northern India.

Mithilā, though considered to be one of the main centres of Vedic education, was also the homeland of Buddhist and Jain thoughts. In ancient Maithil society, the Nature of education was intelligible and well systematised. Different types of education were given for the worldly and other worldly life to the people. Education was very necessary for the achievement of physical and spiritual aspect of life. Spiritual and intellectual rise of man and society was depended on education.[9] According to the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, by self education and preaching, mind of a man becomes concentrated, consequently he becomes free from anxiety. He becomes highly intellectual, reputed and works for the prosperity of the world. He accomplishes his social and other responsibilities.[10] There are references of five kinds of educational rituals (Saṁskāras) in ancient Mithilā. These are vidyāraṁbha, upanayana, vedāraṁbha, keśānta and samāvartana. The education of the child began in the Gurukula, the teacher's house where he had to live till the completion of his studies. These Gurukulas were centres of physical and moral learnings.[11] The system of teaching was individual and each pupil was separately instructed by the teacher though there may have been occasions, when the teacher explained something

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9. J. S. Mishra, *Prachina Bharata ka Samajik Itihas*, Patna 1986, p. 500.
10. *Satapath Brahman*, 2.2.2.6; 11.5.7.1-5; *Taittariya Samhita*, 6.3.10.5.
11. U. Thakur, *History of Mithila* (IInd) p. 537.

all the pupils at the same time. When the Brāhmaṇic system of education first established, writing was unknown but, later on, when writing came into vogue the learning through written texts was added as a work of teacher.[12] The medium of instruction was Sanskrit language, The education was given through discussion and debates and conferences and Sabhās were also organised. The learned teacher throw light on the service of the abstract philosophical principles and topics.

Buddhist and Jain educational concept were also present in ancient Mithilā. Two Suttas[13] of the *Majjhima-Nikāya* related to the visits of the Buddha to the Mithilā country. According to one the Buddha stayed with Ānand at the Makhādeva Āṁbavana and preached the Makhādeva suttas,[14] From the account of the peregrinations of Mahāvira preserved in his medieval biographies it appears that Mithilā was a special field of his activity.[15] He spent no less than six rainy seasons in Mithilā.[16]

In ancient Mithilā, different types of education were given to the students. It was not necessary that higher knowledge of the Upaniṣads was taught in the first period of life. This is clear from instances of Śvetaketu and Gautama, the pupils of Pravāhana Jaivāli and Janaka, Gārgī and Ārtabhāga, the pupils of Yājñavalkya.[17] The length of the course varied according to the number of Vedas studied.[18] The lesson of Brahmavidyā was also taught. Sukadevaji, the son of the ṛṣi Veda Vyās had visited Janakapura to learn the lesson on Brahmavidyā from king Janaka.[19] Gadāyuddha education was taught by Balbhadra to Duryodhan in ancient Mithilā. Ātma Vidyā and Ādhyātma Vidyā were also taught. The great Mithilā philosophers Gautama and Kapila wrote treatises also on medical science. Nimi and his successor Janaka vaideha are quoted in the Brahmavaivartta as having written treatises on Āyurveda,[20] geometry, algebra, astrology, astronomy, Law. ethics

12. F. E. Keay, *Ancient Indian Education* (1980 Delhi) p. 41.
13. *Majjim-Nikaya*, pp. 74-83 & pp. 133-146.
14. *Buddhacharya*, p. 378.
15. J. C. Jain, Life in the ancient India as Depicted in the Jain Canons, Bombay 1947, p. 251.
16. *Kalpa Sutra*, Sutra-122.
17. *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, VI. 2.7; II. 4.
18. *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, ii, 45-47.
19. Makhan Jha, *Mithila and Mahakoshal* (Delhi 1982) p. 132.
20. U. Thakur, *H. M.* (1988) p. 530.

causistry, Bhūtavidyā, kṣātravidyā, economics, agriculture, anatomy, grammar, and philology were also tought.[21] Sikṣā, chandas, history, Nirukta, Kalpa, Mantra, Purāṇa, Dharmaśāstras, Mimāṁsā, Nyāya, Art etc. were taught also in ancient Mithilā.[22]

Mithila too was gradually developing into an intellectual centre and its king were acquiring fame as learned persons. There were no educational institutions like modern school or college but teaching was done by Guru in tols or elsewhere. This is illustrated by Śuka's visit to Mithilā to acquire wisdom.[23] The court of Mithilā was famous for its patronage of learning, many teachers used to visit it and have discussions with the Videhan kings on spiritual matters.[24] The sacred centres of Mithilā were most probably educational centres. These are Girijā sthān, Durgā sthān, Rājeshwari sthān, Bhuvaneswari sthān. Bhadrakālikā sthān, Chamunda sthān, Sonāmai sthān, Chhinmasta Devī sthan, Devi sthān, Sidheshwari sthān, Ugratārā sthan, Jaimangla sthan, Kapileshwar sthan etc.[25] The Aśramas of Ṛsies were the educational centres viz. Valmikyāśrama, Kuśikāśrama, Vibhāṇḍaka Yogyāśrama, Viśvāmitrālaya, Gautamāśrama, Vasiṣṭhāśrama, Gautamakuṇḍa Ahilyāsthāna, Dadhīchi Kuṇḍa, Yājñavalkyāśrama etc. Most of the place names in Mithilā are commemorative of the particular branch of learning that has been perfected or specialized e g. Yajuar-Seat of Yajurveda, Riga Seat ef Ṛgveda, Athari-Seat of Atharvaveda, Mau-behata-Seat of Madhyāndin-Sākhā, Kuṭhumā-Seat of Kauṭhumi Sākhā, Sakari-Sakkai Sākhā, Bhaṭṭa-Simari and Bhaṭṭapura-Seat of Bhaṭṭa school of Mimāṁsā.[26]

There were no examination system in modern sense and the student was allowed to go home only when the teacher was satisfied with his progress. But after the termination of the course the scholar was presented to an assembly of learned men who sometimes examined him.[27] *Sāstrārtha* was the main system of examination. After this examination some degrees were also given e.g. Brahmjñānī, Tattvajñānī etc. Snātaka, Upādhyāy, Mahopādhyāy, Mahāmahopādhyāya were

21. F. E. Keay, *A. I. E.* p. 42.
22. *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidas, 5. 11.
23. *Mahabharat*, XII. 325-326.
24. Y. Mishra, *History of Videha*, p. 270.
55. M. Jha, *M & M*, p. 82.
26. *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, Patna Vol. XXXIII, Part I & II, p. 47.
27. U. Thakur, *H. M.* (II) p. 534.

the main degrees. Svayaṁbara was also a system of examination. King Janak had called a big *sabhā* of kings and the princes to lift the sacred bow and break it. The king had proclaimed that whosoever broke it, would be married with his celebrated daughter, Sitā. As the myth has it when Rāma the prince of Ayodhyā lifted the sacred bow and broke it into pieces Sitā was married with Rāma.[28] *Salākā-Parīkṣā* and *Ṣaḍāyantra-Parīkṣā* were also present in ancient Mithilā.

A development of relation between teacher and pupil was exaltation of the teacher to such a position of reverence that he was Worshipped by his pupil. In the schools of the early Vedānta the teacher or Guru, was always one who was himself supposed to have reached emancipation and thus to have come to the realization that he is Brāhmaṇa. In his devotion, or *bhakti*, for Brāhmaṇa it was but a short step for the pupil to feel *bhakti* also for the Guru, who was thus identified with Brāhmaṇa. This is referred to as early as the Śvetāśvatara Upniṣad,[29] but it received a great emphasis in all the chief *bhakti* sects from at least the seventh century A. D. In these the disciple was taught to worship his Guru as god. This was of course an honour paid to a religious teacher; but it had no effect upon relation of all pupils and teachers and helps to explain the high respect which student of those days had even for a teacher of secular subjects.

A great centre of learning from the very beginning of its history, Mithilā stand pre-eminently as the land given to intellectual pursuits and consequently to speculations about the spiritual well being of man. It is the celebrated land of Upaniṣads, which embody the highest truths ever found out by man about life, soul and hereafter, and record the great impetus given to those speculations by the unrivalled Janaka, the philosopher king of Mithilā. It is the land of the disintegrated Videhas where the great Brahmavidyā, the essence of Vedānta and kernel round which Hindu culture has grown and developed, was perfected. Thus it is the land which bore the torch that has radiated light throughout India and even beyond through all ages. Speaking of Mithilā's contribution to Indian culture one is reminded of that unique name, Yājñavalkya, who first develop the Mādhyandin branch of Yajurveda. In the field of civil law Yājñavalkya's work superseded that of Manu. Among the great Maithil contributors to this branch of literature special mention may be made of Lakṣmīdhara, Srikara,

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28. M. Jha, *M and M*. p. 90.
29. *Śvetāśvatara upanishad.*, vi. 23.

Halāyudha, Bhavadeva, Śrīdhara, Aniruddha and Chaṇḍeśvara and many other who sine the brightest on the pages of history.

According to Upendra Thakur, in the realm of knowledge Mithilā's achievement and contributions have been so prolific, so very profound and so far reaching that they have no parallel. All branches of knowledge have been cultivated there and enriched. Its contribution to philosophy of which India is justly proud are, however, superb. Nyāya was first systematised by Gautama, and in the twelfth century Gaṅgeśa gave it a new orientation. In the history of Nyāya and Mimāṁsā, Udyotakara, Maṇḍana, Bharati, Prabhākara, Vācaspati, Pārthasārthī, Udayanāchārya, Murāri Mishra, Pakṣadhara, Bhavanatha and Śaṁkara are some of the illustrious names.

As Mithilā was a celebrated seat of learning, scholars from different parts of the country came here to receive highest knowledge in logic and other branches of learning. It was here that the great Raghunātha Śiromaṇi received his training in logic and later started the famous educational centre at Nadia in Bengal. After Gaṅgeśa, a long list of scholars in Mithilā kept up the glorious tradition of Mimāṁsā for centuries. This brilliant traditions was gloriously maintained.

So Mithilā was the centre of the earliest Brāhmaṇical civilisation in the east. An account in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* leads us to believe that it continued to be the centre of Aryan civilisation for a longer period. Videha was throned with the Brāhmaṇas from the Kuru Pañcāla country. It was a country where Janaka ruled, Yājñavalkya legislated and Gautama mediated. The conversation on the high philosophical principles between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī at Janaka's court points to the great erudition and cultural tradition of Mithilā in those days. When Magadha ceased to give light, Mithilā became the centre of cultural regeneration in India. Mithilā was the homeland of Navya-Nyāya i. e. the amalgation of logic and knowledge of the substance. Vācaspati made Śaṅkarācārya popular in Mithilā. Here was an important centre of Smṛti literature. In the field of literature too it goes to the credit of Mithilā.

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